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## Who I Am: The Meaning of Early Adolescents' Most Valued Activities and Relationships, and Implications for Self-Concept Research

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***Who I Am:***

**The meaning of early adolescents' most valued activities and relationships, and  
implications for self-concept research**

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Self-concept research in early adolescence typically measures young people's self-perceptions of competence in specific, adult-defined domains. However, studies have rarely explored young people's own views of valued self-concept factors and their meanings. For two major self domains, the active and the social self, this mixed methods study identified factors valued most by 526 young people from socioeconomically diverse backgrounds in Ireland (10-12 years), and explored the meanings associated with these in a stratified subsample (n = 99). Findings indicate that self-concept scales for early adolescence omit active and social self factors and meanings valued by young people, raising questions about content validity of scales in these domains. Findings also suggest scales may under-represent girls' active and social selves; focus too much on some school-based competencies; and, in omitting intrinsically salient self domains and meanings, may focus more on contingent (extrinsic) rather than true (intrinsic) self-esteem.

Young people's self-perceptions are centrally implicated in their thoughts, feelings, motivation and behavior, and are thus of enduring interest to researchers (Harter, 2006). Core self-perceptions – thoughts and feelings consistently accessible to conscious awareness – identify the self and are the source of overall evaluations of self-worth/self-esteem (Harter, 1999, 2006; Rosenberg, 1979). These core self-perceptions are usually referred to as the self-concept, a highly complex set of inter-related factors that can be grouped into four overarching domains: the active, social, physical appearance, and psychological selves (Damon & Hart, 1988). The present study focuses on two of these domains, the active and social selves.

The self-concept has been described as a 'hot' variable (Marsh & Craven, 2006), linked in thousands of studies to young people's development and well-being in multiple spheres (e.g., Harter, 2006, 2012; DuBois, Burk-Braxton & Tevendale, 2002; Linver, Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2009). Self-concept domains, measured with standardised scales, have been related to many specific well-being and achievement-related outcomes: for example, self-perceptions about school ability, peer acceptance, physical appearance and physical abilities have been linked to academic achievement, peer adjustment, and eating and exercise behaviors, respectively (Harter, 1999, 2006; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Self-concept scales have also indicated consistent sex differences in self-evaluations: girls perceive their social and language abilities as higher than boys, whereas boys rate their physical and mathematical abilities more strongly, and rate their appearance more positively than girls (Harter, 2012; Wigfield, Battle, Keller & Eccles, 2002), although self-concept researchers note that the amount of variance may be small (Marsh, 1989).

However, despite the widespread application in research of self-concept scales, these are limited in a number of ways. By definition, scales can only measure self domains and limited factors within these. As self-concept scale creators themselves have noted, researchers should guard against assuming that scale content is synonymous with the self-concept itself (Harter, 1982), and children's phenomenologically experienced self-concept is likely to consist of many salient self factors that are not present in self-concept scales (Butler & Gasson, 2005; Byrne, 2002; Harter, 1999; Wylie, 1989). Although some further factors within the active self domain have been proposed, such as musical, artistic or mechanical abilities (Harter, 1999; Vispoel, 2003), it is not known what these or other factors might be, or how they should be prioritised. Further possible limitations of self-concept scales are that they reflect a general tendency in psychology to focus on measurement at the expense of exploring meaning (Bukowski & Adams,

2005); and, being largely adult-constructed, they may not reflect the meanings that are most salient to children (Damon & Hart, 1988).

In this paper, we report on an in-depth exploration of the self factors and meanings that young people valued most in early adolescence within their active and social self domains. Our goal was to increase understanding of these aspects of children's selves, and also to provide data for considering the content validity of active and social domains in existing self-concept/self-esteem scales.

### **Measuring self-concept / self-esteem**

The terms self-concept and self-esteem are bedeviled with multiple and often contradictory usage (Leary, 2006). To clarify ours: we prefer 'self-concept' for overall self-descriptions, and 'self-esteem' for self-evaluations (Rosenberg, 1979). However, scales measuring self-evaluations in specific domains (e.g., academic, physical) often refer to these as 'self-concept' domains. Therefore, to avoid confusion we use that term when referring to those scales.

Given the complexity of the self, it is perhaps unsurprising that operationalizations of the self have employed many diverse strategies. Although some qualitative explorations have been undertaken, most work has been quantitative, employing scales that measure the self either globally, or in multiple specific domains, and which vary greatly in terms of structure and content. Here, we summarize the major approaches to self-concept measurement briefly.

**Global self-concept scales.** Global scales (e.g., Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale; Rosenberg, 1965) are constructed on the premise that researchers cannot know the weightings of multiple self-concept domains and factors within these that contribute to any individual's self-esteem, and that scales should therefore measure overarching self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1979). Global self-esteem has been measured in thousands of developmental studies. However, these have not found consistent associations with academic, social, physical and behavioral outcomes, most likely due to poor specificity matching: global self-esteem is a general construct, but outcomes (such as school achievement or sport ability) are quite specific (Baumeister, Campbell, Krueger & Vohs, 2003; DuBois & Tevendale, 1999; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Indeed Rosenberg himself, observing in the 1970s that self-esteem research was "spinning in its wheels, unable to

get untracked" (1979, p. 286), suggested that global measures were responsible, and that greater accuracy would be achieved by measuring diverse self domains instead.

**Multidimensional self-concept scales.** Scales measuring diverse self domains belong to two broad groups. Some scales first developed in the 1960s contain a mix of items from aspects of the self, summed to derive a total self-esteem score e.g. the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale for Children (Piers, Harris & Herzberg, 2002). These scales are still widely used: the Piers-Harris is the most frequently employed scale for children and adolescents (Butler & Gasson, 2005), including in major national studies e.g., the *Growing Up in Ireland* National Longitudinal Study of Children (Murray et al., 2011). However, over a number of decades, major reviews have cogently demonstrated that these scales, which contain a "potpourri" of items (Harter, 1982, p. 87), lack theoretical rationales and construct validity, particularly for subscales created post-hoc (Byrne, 1996, 2002; Wylie, 1989).

To address such concerns, subsequent multidimensional self-concept scales defined discrete self-concept domains a priori, measuring each domain separately (including distinct subscales for global self-esteem similar to the Rosenberg scale). These are the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC; Harter, 1985) and the Self-Description Questionnaire I (SDQ I; Marsh, 1992). There is substantially stronger construct validity evidence for these scales (Byrne 1996, 2002; Wylie, 1989); they claim to generate the "richest and most accurate" psychometric picture available of a child's self (Harter, 1999, p. 5), and have yielded many valuable findings relating to the self domains they measure (see e.g. Harter, 2006; Marsh & Craven, 2006). Therefore we focus on these scales as comparators in this study, employing the versions designed for early adolescence.

However, the degree to which even these two, more valid, 'a priori' multidimensional self-concept scales, the SPPC and SDQ-I, reflect children's and young people's valued self-concept factors can be queried. In the active self domain, both measure just school and sports ability. In the social self domain, the SDQ-I, but not the SPPC, includes a parent subscale that reflects many facets of the child-parent relationship (unusually so among self-concept scales for early adolescence), and both measure peer popularity; other social relationships such as siblings and extended family are not measured. In terms of meanings for the active and social domains, both scales focus on ability and competence, either exclusively (SPPC; Harter, 1985) or

predominantly (SDQ I; Marsh, 1992). However, it has been established that young people value many self factors not represented in these scales (Byrne, 2002; Wylie, 1989) and that they associate meanings other than ability/competence with their most valued self factors (Eccles, Wigfield, Harold & Blumenfeld, 1993). This raises the possibility that, even when demonstrating good *construct* validity, self-concept scales may lack *content* validity in the active and social self domains.

**Establishing content validity.** Validity checking during scale construction is often limited to statistical checks in the later stages of test creation, such as exploring internal and external criterion or construct validity (Anastasi & Urbina, 1997). However, ideally, a scale's *content* validity should be assessed first. Content validity, or the extent to which "a particular empirical measurement reflects a specific domain of content", is considered to be the most difficult form of validity to establish (Carmines & Woods, 2004, p. 1171; Wylie, 1974). Carmines and Woods (2004) specify the steps required. Before sampling items reflecting the construct, and translating them into a form suitable for testing, the process must begin by specifying the construct's 'full universe' of content.

For abstract psychological constructs such as the self-concept, systematic observation of a full universe of content cannot be conducted; therefore 'expert' definition of the universe of items is required (Carmines & Woods, 2004). In developmental psychology, it is common practice for the universe of items to be defined by expert adults, employing relatively little consultation with children and young people, based on the assumption that adults possess greater understanding and expertise (Mayall, 2001). This practice applies to self-concept scales, whose domains and content have largely been specified by adult researchers (Butler & Gasson, 2005).

More recently, however, research approaches that construe children as expert in their own experience, lives, and selves, have found that children's priorities and views of themselves often differ from those of adults (Crivello, Camfield & Woodhead, 2009; Greene & Hill, 2005; Valentine, 1999). This therefore raises the question of whether scales should employ self factors of interest to adult researchers, or whether it may be more valid to include factors valued by children – and whether, in terms of self-concept, such factors differ.

Some self-concept scales were developed in part by accessing young people's views, but authors' reports indicate that the degree of consultation was limited (SPPC, Harter, 1985; Piers &

Harris, 1964). In certain qualitative self-concept studies, open-ended methods similar to the Twenty Statement Test (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954) – e.g., Montemayor and Eisen (1977), or Tanti, Stukas, Halloran and Foddy (2008) – have been used to consult children and young people directly. However, many such qualitative approaches have not explored the *meanings* of valued domains. A valuable exception is a rich study of children's and adolescents' self-understandings (Damon & Hart, 1988), which clearly established the benefits of working closely with children and young people to identify their meanings. Damon and Hart clearly refuted Montemayor and Eisen's (1977) conclusion – still widely cited – that self-concept is physical in early childhood and becomes psychological later, finding that four overarching self-concept domains were present from early childhood: social (relationships), active (activities), psychological (thoughts and feelings) and physical (perceptions of appearance). However, Damon and Hart's (1988) focus was on delineating the developmental stages of those overarching self-concept domains, so their findings do not address the detailed content and meanings of young people's valued self factors within those broader domains.

### **The active and social self**

As noted above, within the extensive construct of the self-concept, Damon and Hart (1988) identified four overarching domains that are all salient throughout childhood and youth: the *psychological*, *appearance*, *social*, and *active* selves. As perceptions of appearance have already been strongly associated with self-esteem in a large body of international research (see Harter, 2012, for a detailed review), for this study we made a pragmatic decision to focus on two of the four key self domains that have been less explored in this context, the active and social self. These have particular links to young people's motivation, behavior and self-worth (DuBois et al., 2002; Harter, 2006; Rosenberg, 1979); and studies report sex differences in these domains, with boys typically focused more on sports and being active, and girls more on relationships (Barber, Stone & Eccles, 2010; Larson & Verma, 1999).

The *active self* is strongly related to young people's development, well-being, identity and self-esteem (Barber et al., 2010; Coatsworth, Palen, Sharp, & Ferrer-Wreder, 2006). Specific activity types and patterns affect self-esteem and other outcomes: e.g., young people engaging only in sports have poorer outcomes than those engaging in other activities as well (Linver et al., 2009). The *social self* has been described as central to the self through life; in the early years,

feelings of existing (the self) and of being worthwhile (self-esteem) – come into being through relationships (Levin, 1992); later, the self continues to react to the social surround (Feiring & Taska, 1996; Furman & Buhrmester, 1985).

However, self-concept scales may be limited in these active and social domains. A more accurate view of young people's selves and outcomes is likely to result when enquiring about the full range of activities they value, yet scales' activity domains typically access team/field sports and schoolwork/academic activity only. Scales' social domains typically measure peer popularity, omitting close friendships, most family and other relationships – although the SDQI (Marsh, 1992), which contains a nuanced parent relationship subscale, is an exception. As Pomerantz, Qin, Wang, and Chen recently noted (2009), it is curious that relationships with parents are often absent from research on early adolescent self-construals, as parents are central throughout childhood and adolescence. This suggests that it may be relevant to explore further factors within the active and social self-concept domains in early adolescence.

### **Study aims and research questions**

In this study, we aimed to identify young people's most spontaneously salient active and social self factors, the meanings they associate with these, and to explore the content validity of active and social domains of self-concept scales designed for early adolescence. We chose to focus on early adolescence, because self-concept dimensionality expands at this time, and the salience of self-concept factors becomes acute (Byrne, 1996); and because this rich and complex period is less frequently explored than early childhood or later adolescence (McAdams & Olson, 2010).

In a first, exploratory study, we had employed the 'draw-and-write' method (elucidated further below) with 125 middle-class young people aged 10-13 years. We found that many activities and relationships young adolescents valued most were not represented in self-concept scales (Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2010). We also identified some pronounced sex differences in valued domains, with boys favoring team/field sports activities, and girls citing a range of valued activities including other ways of being physically active. In addition, girls cited more valued relationships than boys did (Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2010). In the present study, we sought to expand on those preliminary findings, by (i) accessing a substantially larger and demographically



diverse sample and (ii) identifying not just the most valued activities and relationships, but also the *meanings* young people associated with these.

The study was therefore guided by four research questions, designed to amplify knowledge of active and social self-concept in early adolescence: (1) Which activities and relationships are most valued, by a broad demographic, in early adolescence? (2) What are the meanings young people attach to these valued activities and relationships? (3) Are there sex differences/similarities in valued activities and relationships and their meanings? (4) Are the most valued activities/ relationships, and their meanings, reflected in widely used self-concept scales?

## Method

### Design

The study employed a mixed methods design, using semi-structured methods with a large sample, collecting qualitative data, and employing both qualitative (thematic) and quantitative (frequency and inferential) analyses.

Young people first communicated their valued active and social self-concept factors with 'draw-and-write', a semi-structured graphical method that analyses overt (not projective) content. The use of drawings has been found to double the amount of verbal communication in interviews in young people up to 12 years of age with no loss of accuracy (Patterson & Hayne, 2011), and draw-and-write has been used effectively in research with children and young people into mid-adolescence to examine abstract themes, including pain relief (Franck, Sheikh & Oulton, 2008); literacy (Kendrick & McKay, 2004) time (Christensen & James, 2008); the self in the future (O'Connor, 2008); and the active and social self (Tatlow-Golden & Guerin, 2010). After the draw-and-write phase was complete, participants expanded on the meanings of these valued active and social self factors in individual interviews.

### Ethics and participants

The study underwent full review by the university's human research ethics committee. Participation was opt-in with signed parental consent. Young people's informed agreement was sought on all research occasions.

Draw-and-write participants were 526 young people, aged 10-12 years ( $M = 11.3$  years; 48% boys; 70% participation rate). To achieve a representative sample for the greater Dublin region, stratified random cluster sampling (Robson, 2002) was employed. All co-educational state-funded primary schools in the region were included as clusters, then stratified into six cells (three for school size and two for community type, i.e., designated disadvantaged and non-designated). In participating schools, all 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> class students were invited to participate (the last two years of primary school in Ireland; age equivalent to US 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade). For interviews, a 20% subsample was selected randomly from within strata of grade, sex, and self-concept themes depicted. Individual interviews with 99 young people (10-12 years;  $M = 11.2$  years; 46 % boys; 92% participation rate) explored the meanings they associated with their valued self-concept factors.

### Measures and procedure

To elicit participants' most valued activities and relationships, we invited them to draw and write on A4-sized sheets of paper (21 cm x 30 cm), asking them to '*Please draw a picture of yourself doing your favorite thing or things. It can be things you like to do at home, at school, or anywhere else... you decide!*' (active self) and '*Please draw a picture of yourself with your favorite person or people. It can be people at home, at school, or anywhere else... you decide!*' (social self). They were also invited to write: '*Please tell me something about your favorite thing to do/favorite person here*'.

To confirm that the 'favorite' activities and relationships participants drew and wrote about were salient to them, children were asked to rate the importance of these activities and relationships with Visual Analogue Scales (VAS). VAS are recommended for children aged 8 years and up and are used by clinicians and researchers to assess the strength of children's perceptions (Huguet, Stinson & McGrath, 2010; Shields, Palermo, Powers, Grewe & Smith, 2003; Thivel, Isacco, Rousset, Boirie, Morio & Duche, 2011). They typically consist of 10cm horizontal lines, anchored at each end by non-standardized verbal descriptors; respondents are asked to represent the degree of an experience by marking the line at a chosen point (Huguet et al., 2010).

In this study, active and social self draw-and-write pages were each followed by six VAS, on which participants were asked to rate the activities or people they had depicted. The VAS

anchors were 'not at all important to me' (on the far left, scored as 0) or 'extremely important to me' (on the far right, scored as 10). Completion rates were high: 94.1 % (n = 495) completed at least one VAS for the active self and 88.4 % (n = 465) did so for the social self. Modal VAS scores for activities and for relationships were 10, or 'extremely important to me'; means were 7.34 (SD = 2.66) for activities and 9.20 (SD = 1.38) for relationships. These high modes, high means, and low standard deviations, support the interpretation of children's 'favorite' activities and relationships as highly salient to them.

In the second phase of the study, individual interviews (approximately 20 minutes on average) used each participant's individual draw-and-write data as prompts to elicit their reasons for valuing the people and activities they had chosen (*Is that your favorite person (thing to do)? Would you like to change your mind about him/her (it)?; why is he/she (it) your favorite person (thing to do)?; what do you like about him/her (it)? Why is he/she (it) important to you?*). Interviews also probed ('*can you tell me more about that? Can you think of another reason why?*') to obtain the fullest understanding (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

**Analyses** Analysis of both phases of the study (draw-and-write and interview) involved qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2000) and frequency analyses of themes. For qualitative content analysis of draw-and-write, both authors independently noted the full range of young people's visual and written representations separately for activities and relationships, grouping them into key themes. Final themes were agreed through discussion. To determine reliability, 10% were randomly selected and coded by two independent researchers. Inter-rater agreement, (calculated by recording the numbers of agreed themes divided by the total number of themes coded, and converting to a percentage) was very high, 93%. The same analysis process was undertaken for interviews to generate themes for young people's meanings; after discussion and amalgamation of some themes, inter-rater reliability for interviews was also high (80%), above 70% as recommended by Guerin and Hennessy (2002). Conceptually related interview themes were then placed in clusters. Finally, frequency analyses identified the most valued themes and meaning across the group for activities and relationships; chi-square analyses explored sex differences.



*Non-team physical activity:* I am at karate. I like going because my friends go (Boy, 10)



*Non-team physical activity:* Doing hip-hop is my favourite hobby because I love to dance (Girl, 12)



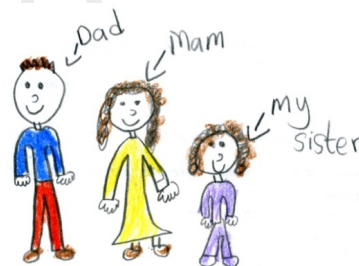
*Media activity:* I am playing on the computer. I like it because you can do things you can't in real world (Boy, 10)



*Creative activity:* I love photography. My aunt talked me into it (Boy, 12)



*Siblings:* I drew me and my brothers because they are the most important people in my life (Boy, 10)



*Parents:* Because they love me. I love them more than they will ever know (Girl, 11)



*Extended family:* My big cousin. He is really fun and I love him more than anything or anyone else in the world. (Boy, 11)



*Extended family:* I drew my granny. She is my favourite person because she loves me and I love her (Girl, 11)

Figure 1: Examples of salient active and social self factors absent from many or all self-concept scales

## Results

Here, we present the findings for young people's most valued factors and meanings for their active selves, followed by their social selves. A selection of draw-and-write responses can be seen in Figure 1.

### Most valued activities: The active self

Young people depicted 147 valued activities, from soccer to writing, playing the drums to playing with pets, skateboarding, designing clothes, playing Wii, and 'messaging' (fooling around) with friends. Responses were grouped into 14 themes (see table 1). Just over a third of young people (40%;  $n = 209$ ) described between two and ten valued activities, so percentages sum to more than 100.

Table 1 Valued active self factors: Themes and sample activities

Theme	Sample activities depicted	Total (N = 526)		Boys (n = 251)		Girls (n = 275)	
		%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
<b>Team sport*</b>	Soccer, Irish sports, rugby, hockey, basketball, cricket	48.9	257	71.7	180	28.0	77
<b>Other physical *</b>	e.g. dance, running, chasing, swimming, tennis, riding,	28.7	151	17.1	43	37.8	104
<b>Creative *</b>	Music, singing, drama, art, photography, writing	20.2	106	10.8	27	28.7	79
<b>Friends *</b>	Playing, hanging out, talking, texting, laughing	16.5	87	7.2	18	25.1	69
<b>Using media *</b>	TV, PS3, Xbox, Nintendo DS, Wii, Computer, Laptop, Internet, iPod	13.3	70	16.7	42	10.2	28
<b>Family *</b>	Parent; family outings, playing with /caring for siblings	10.3	54	7.2	18	13.1	36
<b>Pets *</b>	Dog, cat, hamster, rabbit, snake, horse	8	42	3.6	9	12.0	33
<b>Reading for fun</b>	Novels, non-fiction, comics	6.7	35	5.6	14	7.6	21
<b>Self in future</b>	Sports/ pop star, farming, zookeeper,	3.8	20	4.4	11	3.3	9
<b>Shopping *</b>	Going shopping, buying clothes	3.6	19	0.4	1	6.5	18
<b>School</b>	School; spelling; learning; Irish	1.1	6	0.8	2	1.5	4
<b>Math</b>	Liking math	0.6	3	0.8	2	0.4	1
<b>Religion</b>	God, Jesus	0.6	3	0.4	1	0.7	2
<b>Other</b>	e.g. baking, fishing, snooker, debating	6.8	36	6.8	17	6.9	19

Notes: \* denotes significant chi-square for sex difference.

As many interviewees chose more than one salient activity, percentages sum to more than 100.

Physical activities, valued by two-thirds of participants (67%;  $n = 354$ ). These were coded into two separate themes. Half the total sample drew a **Team/field sport**, e.g. Gaelic football (an Irish team field sport), soccer, basketball, field hockey and others. A quarter depicted **Non-team physical activities**, such as dance (not typically a team sport in Ireland), chasing, or skateboarding. **Creative activities** were valued by one in five (e.g. music, drawing, painting, designing clothes, building models, photography, or writing stories). Nearly one in five cited playing/hanging out with **Friends**; one in ten cited being with **Family**; and nearly one in ten cited being with **Pets**. Overall, 28% ( $n = 146$ ) participants cited a relationship as a favorite *activity*, indicating that social factors are closely entwined with young people's valued activities. One in eight depicted **Media** including TV, internet, games, and listening to music. Further themes were **Reading for fun**, **Schoolwork**, **Math**, **Self in the future**, **Shopping** and **Religion** (see Table 1); other activities included baking, gardening, sleeping, daydreaming and chess.

**The active self: Meanings of valued positive factors.** The meanings of young people's most valued activities were divided into 17 themes and then grouped into six clusters: **Social Connections**; **Achievement**; **Fun and Free**; **Being Physical**; **Time**; and **Others**. Themes are described here within each cluster. Themes and frequencies are shown in Table 2.

**Social Connections** This was the dominant cluster of meanings for valued activities, cited by nearly two thirds of interviewees (59%;  $n = 58$ ). Within this cluster, **Friends** were primary, valued in physical activities – an 11 year old boy liked Gaelic football training ‘because most of my friends are there’ – and in other activities, e.g., online games with social networking capacity. Several boys mentioned online friendships in the combat game ‘Call of Duty’; an 11 year old girl maintained her school friendships through the fashion website ‘Stardoll’: ‘everyone’s on it and we can chat to each other’. A further social meaning for activities was **Family Time**: one in eight valued having time with a parent, such as a 12 year old girl who went running with her father. **Family Connection** was valued by one in ten, e.g., playing accordion was meaningful to a 10 year old girl because ‘when I told my grandda he was just really proud, because he used to play it’; connections to family were also felt in activities such as painting, photography and sports.

**Achievement** Achievement-related meanings of activities were cited by 48% interviewees ( $n = 47$ ). Two-fifths described **Challenge and Achievement** when they persisted and improved at sporting, creative and media activities, e.g., soccer ‘cause I’m getting better all the time’ (boy,

11); computer games, as 'I like being challenged... and when I lose I go back to the beginning and just... keep trying...' (boy, 12). Two further achievement themes were mentioned, but infrequently: **Ability**, for those who stated they were good at an activity (e.g. a 10 year old girl said 'I love playing Gaelic [football] and I'm like very good at it'); and **Recognition**, 'when I do really well... my Mum, my Dad, and my brother and my sister ... give me a load of praise, and I'm like happy, because... I don't get praise... very often' (11 year old girl). Overall, however, most described activities as meaningful for challenge and skill-building rather than ability.

Table 2 Meanings for valued active self factors: Themes and frequencies

Cluster	Themes	Sample content	Total N = 99		Boys n = 45		Girls n = 54	
			%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Social Connections</b>	<b>Friends</b>	Being with/ making friends	47.5	47	53.3	24	42.6	23
	<b>Family time</b>	Time with family members	12.1	12	11.1	5	13	7
	<b>Family connection</b>	Family engage in activity	10.1	10	8.9	4	11.1	6
<b>Achievement</b>	<b>Challenge/ Achieve</b>	Build skills; achieve goals	38.4	38	40	18	37	20
	<b>Ability</b>	e.g. 'I'm good at it'	6.1	6	6.7	3	5.6	3
	<b>Recognition</b>	From adults, peers	5.1	5	2.2	1	7.4	4
<b>Fun and free</b>	<b>Fun</b>	It's fun	33.3	33	40	18	27.8	15
	<b>Escape</b>	Free; forget worries; flow	15.2	15	11.1	5	18.5	10
<b>Being physical Time</b>	<b>Being physical *</b>	Moving, active, exercise	32.3	32	44.4	20	22.2	12
	<b>How often</b>	Daily, weekly activity	12.1	12	8.9	4	14.8	8
	<b>How long</b>	Number of years has been doing the activity	6.1	6	6.7	3	5.6	3
<b>Others</b>	<b>Passing time</b>	Rainy days; winter; if tired	9.1	9	11.1	5	7.4	4
	<b>Expressing self</b>	Expressing feelings; creative self-expression	7.1	7	2.2	1	11.1	6
	<b>Education</b>	For job; desire to improve	6.1	6	6.7	3	14.8	8
	<b>Don't know</b>		5.1	5	6.7	3	3.7	2
	<b>Future self</b>	Aims, jobs etc	4.0	4	2.2	1	5.6	3
	<b>Other</b>		34.3	34	33	15	35.2	19

Notes: \* denotes significant chi-square for sex differences

As many interviewees chose more than one salient meaning, percentages sum to more than 100.

*Fun and free.* Two themes for activities were cited by a third of interviewees (n = 37). **Fun** was meaningful for almost all valued activities and was not contingent on ability; an 11 year old boy liked sport because 'I'm not the best at playing but I like it cause it's, like, fun'. **Escape**

was meaningful when participants were absorbed in activities such as sports, swimming, reading and drawing: 'Like if I'm, worried about something ... I would draw at home' (girl, 12 years).

*Being Physical* Some interviewees valued team sports, individual sports, and non-sport physical activities (e.g., trampolining, dancing) simply for the chance to be physically active. Dance was one 11 year old girl's favorite activity because 'you get to move about in all different ways'. *Time* was also a source of meaning, defined either by frequency: 'I really like basketball, cause I do it like five times a week' (11 year old girl); or by a length of time an activity had been engaged in, e.g., 'I started playing soccer when I was about three years old' (boy, 11 years).

Further themes were occasionally cited – such as *Future Self* (hoped-for occupations); *Just Passing Time* (e.g. rainy-day PlayStation and Xbox play); and *Expressing Self or Feelings* (creativity and physical activity). *Education* related to goals, obligation, careers or avoiding failure, rather than enjoyment or challenge. Reflecting the diversity of meanings young people associated with valued activities, a third of participants named further meanings, including feeling special (unusual activities); gaining entry to other characters and worlds (reading); and enjoying sound (music and dancing).

**Sex differences and similarities for the active self** Significant sex differences were found for many valued activities (Table 1). More boys depicted team sports,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 100.35, p < .01$ , and electronic media  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 4.89, p = .03$ ; more girls depicted non-team physical activities  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 31.43, p < .01$ , creative activities  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 26.34, p < .01$ , and playing/hanging out with friends  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 30.26, p < .01$ , family,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 4.99, p = .03$  or pets,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 12.65, p < .01$ . Girls were also significantly more likely than boys have a relational focus in their favored activities, by citing a relationship as a favored activity  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 40.56, p < .01$ . However, notably, there was only one significant sex difference for the *meanings* young people attached to their active selves (Table 2): more boys attached meaning to being physically active,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 99) = 5.54, p = .02$ .

### **Most valued relationships: the social self**

Young people's responses for valued relationships (favorite person or people) were grouped into 10 themes (Table 3). Many depicted more than one favorite person (59%;  $n = 309$ ), so percentages sum to more than 100.



Table 3. Valued social self factors depicted in draw-and-write: Themes for favorite people

Theme	People (or animals) depicted	Total (N = 526)		Boys (n = 251)		Girls (n = 275)	
		%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Parents *</b>	Parents singly; in pairs; or with family	66.9	352	60.2	151	73.1	201
<b>Siblings *</b>	Siblings singly or as part of family	53.6	282	46.6	117	60.0	165
<b>Friend(s) *</b>	Friends: singly, or in small or large groups	40.1	211	33.5	84	46.2	127
<b>Extended family*</b>	Grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, godparents	11.6	61	6.4	16	16.4	45
<b>Pet *</b>	Dog, cat, horse, hamster, rabbit, lizard, tortoise, fish	7.8	41	4.8	12	10.5	29
<b>Celebrity *</b>	Sport, music, film celebrities; fictional characters	2.3	12	4.4	11	0.4	1
<b>Girl/ boyfriend</b>	Now or in the future	0.8	4	0.4	1	1.1	3
<b>Religious</b>	God	0.2	1	0	0	0.4	1
<b>Other</b>	Teacher, money, other	1.3	7	1.6	4	1.1	3

Note: \* denotes significant chi-square for sex differences

As many interviewees chose more than one salient relationship, percentages sum to more than 100.

Family was highly valued: 74% ( $n = 390$ ) young people depicted one or more family members, with two-thirds showing **Parents** (one, two, or in a nuclear/ extended family group), over half choosing **Siblings** and one in eight showing members of the **Extended family**, e.g. cousins, aunts, uncles, and grandparents. **Friends** were chosen by two-fifths of participants – less frequently than parents and siblings. Nearly one in ten drew a **Pet** as their favorite ‘person or people’; across active and social selves, 14% ( $n = 74$ ) valued a pet: horses, dogs, cats, rabbits, hamsters, budgies, snakes, lizards, and tortoises. **Celebrities** (from sport, film, music), or a **Girlfriend or boyfriend**, were infrequently shown and **God** featured just once.

**The social self: meanings of valued relationships.** Meanings for valued relationships were grouped into 16 themes from which 5 clusters were created, **Being Cared For**; **Fun**; **Sharing**; **Relationship Quality** and **Time** (Table 4).

**Being Cared For** was the major cluster of meanings for the social self, cited by 68% ( $n = 68$ ). Participants primarily valued **Emotional Care** in relationships with family, friends and pets. A 10 year old boy's family helped with low moods: ‘like, whenever I'm sad they make me happy’ and a 12 year old girl felt supported by her sister: ‘she's like there for me in ... in hard times’. Trust was a prerequisite: ‘you can tell them anything and, they'll keep it a secret, and

they won't go off saying 'oh my god this is what she said!'" (a 12 year old girl, speaking about her friends), as were security and positive emotions: 'when I'm with my friends and family I feel really safe, and happy' (girl, 11 years). One boy (12 years) valued his father because 'he gives me hope that I can do better and ... [that] I'm good'. Some kinds of emotional care, such as physical affection, was only cited for family members. This was also the case for **Practical Care**: parents' and siblings' help with homework, and mothers' help with practicalities, were meaningful: 'When I have to get up really early in the morning ... she's always there trying to help me get dressed and things, even when I'm really sluggish and tired' (11 year old boy). Finally, some felt cared for when receiving **Treats** from friends and relatives (mostly grandparents).

Table 4 Meanings for valued relationships: Themes and frequencies

Cluster	Theme	Sample content	Total N = 99		Boys n = 45		Girls n = 54	
			%	n	%	n	%	n
<b>Being Cared For</b>	<b>Emotional Care</b>	Care, support; feel safe, share feelings.	55.6	55	51.1	23	59.3	32
	<b>Practical Care</b>	Food; homework help; live together	39.4	39	44.4	20	35.2	19
	<b>Treats</b>	Presents, sweets	5.1	5	6.7	3	3.7	2
<b>Fun and play</b>	<b>Play</b>	Playing, games, messing around	31.3	31	35.6	16	27.8	15
	<b>Having Fun</b>	Having fun; sharing a sense of humour	20.2	20	24.4	11	16.7	9
<b>Sharing</b>	<b>Talking *</b>	Talking to each other	22.2	22	11.1	5	31.5	17
	<b>Activities, Interests</b>	Doing things; same interests	22.2	22	17.8	8	25.9	14
	<b>Company</b>	Hanging out	16.2	16	13.3	6	18.5	10
<b>Relationship Quality</b>	<b>Negative Relationship</b>	Fighting, being irritated	14.1	14	11.1	5	16.7	9
	<b>Affection For</b>	Liking or loving them	13.1	13	11.1	5	14.8	8
	<b>Positive Relationship</b>	Get on well, click with each other	11.1	11	13.3	6	9.3	5
	<b>Being Family</b>	Being family or related	7.1	7	6.7	3	7.4	4
	<b>Affection From</b>	Being liked or loved	5.1	5	4.4	2	5.6	3
<b>Time</b>	<b>Time</b>	How long / how often	23.2	23	24.4	11	22.2	12
<b>Other</b>	<b>Don't know</b>		9.1	9	4.4	2	13	7
	<b>Other</b>		29.3	29	20	9	37	20

Note: \* denotes significant chi-square for sex differences

As many interviewees chose more than one salient meaning, percentages sum to more than 100.

**Fun** **Fun and Play** were meaningful with both friends and family for half of interviewees (46%,  $n = 46$ ). Humor and amusement were meaningful in peer groups, 'I just find [them] really funny and enjoyable to be with... and... they amuse me' (boy, 12 years) and also in one-to-one friendships: 'we have the same sense of humor' (girl, 12 years). Family (younger sisters, a grandmother and fathers) were valued for being fun or amusing; a 12 year old girl said she and her father were 'always joking together'.

**Sharing** This was described by 44% ( $n = 44$ ) interviewees. **Shared Activities and Interests** included watching TV or films, drawing, drama, horse-riding, gymnastics, swimming, running, shopping, going on holiday, and more. **Talking** involved shared opinions and conversation with friends: 'we're like always talking to each other and... we have... like loads of things to talk about' (girl, 10 years), as well as family narratives and day-to-day matters with parents. Some simply valued sharing **Company**: '[sisters] are kinda just company' (girl, 12 years).

**Relationship Quality** Positive and negative interactions, and giving and receiving affection, were mentioned by a third of interviewees (36%;  $n = 36$ ). With siblings or friends, a **Negative Relationships** was sometimes mentioned: an 11 year old boy said, 'you fight with your brother... but ... at the end you still like him' while others simply described a **Positive Relationship**: 'it's hard to explain but once you're with a good group of friends there's just a click' (girl, 12 years). Friends, family or pets were valued because of **Affection For** them (liking or loving) or receiving **Affection From** them. **Being Family** was coded when participants simply stated 'because they're my family'.

**Time** Finally, **Time** gave relationships meaning. This was in relation to duration of the relationship: 'I've known her longer and she's known me longer as well' (boy, 12 years), or the frequency of contact, whether this was often, 'you see them like every day' (boy, 12 years), or rare: 'like, eh, you don't really see them a lot and when you see them it's great to see them' (boy, 12 years).

**Sex differences and similarities for the social self.** Girls depicted all social selves significantly more than boys (Table 3) (parents,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 9.91, p < .01$ ; siblings,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 9.46, p < .01$ ; friends,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 8.83, p < .01$ ; extended family,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 12.77, p < .01$  and pets,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 6.07, p = .01$ ), except celebrities, which boys cited

more,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 526) = 9.51, p < .01$ . However, both boys and girls valued parents most, followed by siblings; friends; extended family; pets; and celebrities. In meanings of their valued relationships (Table 4), they only differed significantly regarding talking, which girls cited significantly more frequently than boys,  $\chi^2 (1, N = 99) = 5.89, p = .02$ .

## Discussion

Multidimensional self-concept scales are widely employed in research in early adolescence, yet researchers and scale constructors have noted that these scales are limited in terms of the self-concept factors and meanings that they access. We therefore sought to identify young people's views of two of four major self-concept domains, the active and social self, exploring their most valued activities and relationships and the meanings of these, in a socio-demographically diverse sample. This is the first such study of which we are aware.

Here, we first consider these active and social self-concept findings in relation to existing research on activities and relationships in adolescence and consider potential implications for self-esteem in general. We then compare findings with the content found in self-concept scales.

### The active self: Valued activities and meanings

The 526 young people in this study valued nearly 150 different activities. The most-cited activity cluster was team/field sports, followed by non-team physical, creative, and media activities. The most frequently cited salient meaning of these valued activities was social connections. Very few young people mentioned ability levels in their valued activities, instead citing challenge and personal skill improvement.

A great deal of activities research to date has focused on structured activities, particularly adult-organized activities undertaken with a peer group, such as team-based organized sports or performance arts, which are common in the United States (Barber et al., 2010). However, activities favored by young people in this study indicate several further meaningful 'experiential niches' in early adolescence (Larson & Verma, 1999) and research suggests that these may be of value for young people's development and self-esteem. For example, taking part in activities that are adult-organized, but not peer-based (e.g. playing an instrument in a family music group) may support self-esteem through experiencing family routines (Fiese & Parke, 2002). Engaging in

non-organized and peer-based activities (e.g. skateboarding; playing video games with friends) may facilitate acquisition of social capital (Valentine, Holloway & Bingham, 2000); and non-organized and non-peer-based activities (e.g., writing stories) may support self-esteem through skill improvement in areas of intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 2000).

Notably, schoolwork-based and religious activities were cited very infrequently in this study, a finding that held for both boys and girls. The absence of religious activities surprised us: Catholic schools in this study were preparing for Confirmation in the months when data was collected, and religious activities feature widely in activities research in North and South America and in Europe (Barber et al., 2010; Coatsworth, Sharp, Palen, Darling, Cumsille, & Marta, 2005; Fletcher, Nickerson & Wright, 2003; Linver et al., 2009). The low salience of religious activities may reflect social changes in Ireland, where regular Mass (church) attendance fell from nearly 90% of the population in 1984, falling to 18% in 2011 (Irish Central, 2013).

The almost complete absence of references to schoolwork as an active self factor contrasts with some adolescent activities research (e.g., Linver et al., 2009) is. Although the low rate of reporting school work does not necessarily indicate that it is unimportant to early adolescent self concept, it suggests that school work is less spontaneously salient than other aspects of participants' active selves. This is supported by a study that compared relative domain valuing by Irish young people, their parents and teachers, in which young people placed schoolwork low in their hierarchy, in contrast to parents' and teachers' placements (Sixsmith, NicGabhainn, Fleming, & O'Higgins, 2007). Such findings suggest that in early adolescence, young people may not share adults' views of the centrality of schoolwork to their self-concept.

It was particularly interesting that for their most valued activities, young people described their *skill improvement* or *experience of challenge* as central, rather than their level of ability. Young people who focus on perseverance and skill improvement, rather than innate ability, display greater persistence and motivation when facing challenges; through this they develop more robust self-esteem that is not contingent upon performance (Mueller & Dweck, 1998). As self-concept scales' questions ask about being 'good at' activities, rather than measuring self-perceptions of effort or improvement, it is possible that they measure a less robust, contingent version of self-esteem; we consider implications of this below.

### **Valued relationships: The social self**

For valued relationships, young people cited parents most, followed by siblings, friends, extended family, and pets. Notably, parents rarely feature in research on early adolescent selves and self-construals, despite being central throughout childhood and adolescence (Pomerantz et al., 2009). Other valued relationships – apart from peers and friends – also feature relatively rarely in developmental literature. However, siblings, extended family and even pets have been linked to self-esteem, well-being and development in early adolescence (Alper, 2013; Covert, Whiren, Keith & Nelson, 1985; Dunn, 2004; Lundström, 2001; Pomerantz et al., 2009; Sixsmith et al., 2007).

For all relationships, receiving emotional care was the most frequently cited meaning. Relationships were also valued for fun and play, sharing activities and talking. Being cared for practically by family members was also valued. These meanings are not accessed by self-concept scales, which typically focus on number of friends (peer popularity), and parents' perceptions of behavior, although a partial exception is the SDQ I (Marsh, 1992), which has a rich parent relationship subscale reflecting several of these meanings.

### **Sex differences and similarities for the active and social self**

Some significant sex differences were seen in young people's valued active and social selves. A very high proportion of boys valued field/team sports most, and more boys found physical activity meaningful, whereas girls were more likely to value multiple and different activities than boys: non-team and non-sport physical activities, including dance (which is not typically a team sport in Ireland); field/team sports; creative activities; and others. Girls also cited relationships with a wide range of people (and pets) as their favorite activity significantly more than boys did. For the social self, girls cited significantly more valued relationships overall, and fewer boys found talking meaningful. Such findings tally with research that consistently identifies boys as more focused on sports and being active, and girls as more relational (Barber et al., 2010; Larson & Verma, 1999).

However, it was also striking that boys and girls valued some self-concept factors equally frequently, and shared many meanings: they did not differ significantly in which relationships they valued most; nor in most reasons for valuing active and social selves. These commonalities of meaning suggest that dualistic gendered assumptions should be tempered (Thorne, 2002).

### **Comparison with self-concept scale domains and meanings**

It is notable that many of the active and social self-concept factors most valued by young people are absent from key self-concept scales including those used as primary comparators for this study, the SPPC (Harter, 1985) and SDQ I (Marsh, 1992): for example, non-sports physical activity, creative or media activities; parent or sibling relationships; relationships with extended family and pets. Furthermore, schoolwork features prominently in almost all self-concept scales for children and adolescents, yet was absent from young people's spontaneous responses in this study.

Two active and social self factors that young people in this study valued, sports and peers, are consistently found in self-concept scales. However, scales omit the primary meanings that participants in this study described for these. When measuring sport self-concept, scales assess competence or relative ability, e.g. "Some kids feel that they are better than others their age at sports BUT Other kids don't feel that they can play as well" (SPPC; Harter, 1985). In contrast, participants found sport meaningful for being social, improving personal skill levels, and having fun. For peer self-concept, scales focus on popularity (e.g. "I have more friends than most other kids"; SDQ I, Marsh, 1992), yet the primary meaning participants cited was emotional care and support in friendship.

The lack of further social factors in self-concept scales, beyond peer popularity – with the exception of the SDQ I (Marsh, 1992) – is particularly surprising, given the role that all close relationships play for self-worth. The SPPC's author created the Social Support Scale for Children (Harter, 1985/2012) to measure self-perceptions regarding parents, teachers, classmates and close friends. However this scale is not well known, is much less cited than the SPPC, and is absent from key self-concept scale reviews (e.g., Blascovich & Tomaka, 1991; Butler & Gasson, 2005; Byrne, 1996; Wylie, 1989).

It is of course essential to bear in mind that self-concept scales cannot address all aspects of the self, as scale constructors have noted (Harter, 1999); one should not make the error of reifying the self-concept as reflected in scales, particularly for such a complex and multifaceted construct. However, the self, self-concept and self-esteem have all too often been viewed as synonymous with "whatever is measured with tests of the self-concept" (Bruner, 1990, p.101).

The present study indicates that many active and social self factors and meanings that are salient in early adolescence, yet are absent from self-concept scales.

### **Strengths and limitations of the study**

Given the complex nature of the self, this study was of necessity limited in scope, confining itself to early adolescence and to accessing positive, favored factors within the active and social self domains. Other aspects of the self and further age groups remain to be explored: the approach we developed – accessing young people's perspectives with methods amenable to the age group under study – could be applied to do so. For example, negative self factors are also worthy of exploration; psychological and physical appearance self domains are also salient throughout childhood and the adolescent years (Damon & Hart, 1988); and it would be valuable to further explore the relative salience of activities, relationships and other aspects of the self.

In addition, it should be borne in mind that selves are culturally variable (Oyserman & Markus, 1993) within cultures as well as across them. For example, Irish children of a similar age, but from rural rather than urban settings, indicated that important self factors were religion and farming, both absent from the responses in this sample (NicGabhainn & Sixsmith, 2005). Young people in more collectivist cultures might describe different patterns of priorities in their valued relationships and activities (Oyserman & Markus, 1993), possibly with even more of a relational focus than identified in this study. Finally, the data for this study were collected in 2009, when it was highly unusual for primary school students in Ireland to have smartphones. As 22% children aged 9-12 years in Ireland now own a smartphone (O'Neill & Dinh, 2015), we anticipate that more media-related responses would now be found for young people's active selves.

### **Implications for research with self-concept scales**

Notwithstanding these limitations, this study has achieved the first comprehensive exploration, of which we are aware, of the full range of valued factors in early adolescence within the active and social domains of self-concept, with a demographically representative sample. In doing so, it identifies issues regarding self-concept scales that we believe it would be beneficial for researchers of early adolescence to consider:



**Do self-concept scales underrepresent children's priorities?** For the active and social self domains, self-concept scales for early adolescence typically address ability in schoolwork and sports, and popularity with peers. It was notable that in participants' spontaneous accounts of salient self factors, these aspects of the self appeared infrequently: they very rarely cited schoolwork; they focused on friendship *quality* rather than on popularity, and on many other relationships; and they were less concerned with *how good* they were at their favored activities than with their individual *skill progression*.

It is therefore possible that self-concept scales favor adult researchers' priorities over those of children. Adult-defined areas of interest, such as school functioning, are doubtless of value, and have consistently been shown to be in self-concept research (e.g., Harter, 2006; Marsh & Craven, 2006). However, researchers should be aware that young people's spontaneously salient self factors and meanings may differ.

**Do self-concept scales under-represent girls' active and social self-concept factors, more than boys'?** Our findings suggest that the self-concept scales used as comparators in this study, despite being psychometrically more sound than others, under-represent girls' salient active and social self-concepts more than boys'. Nearly three-quarters of boys cited team/field sports for their active selves, yet just over a quarter of girls did so. Girls cited many other activities they valued most, including artistic, musical, dramatic and other creative activities, and non-sporting physical activities (e.g. hip-hop or Irish dancing). Unlike team-based sports, these activities do not feature in self-concept scales. Such gendered activity values in early adolescence reflect international activity patterns, where boys are consistently found to be more involved in team sports than girls; examples are the US (Pate, Trost, Levin, & Dowda, 2000), Ireland (Fahey, Delaney, & Gannon, 2005; Williams et al., 2009), the UK (Flintoff & Scraton, 2001) and Norway (Klomsten, Skaalvik & Espes, 2004). Whereas sports feature in self-concept scales, other activities rarely do.

For their social self-concept, girls and boys valued a similar set of social relationships; many do not feature in self-concept scales. However, girls cited significantly more relationships than boys did, and also cited significantly more relationships as salient when describing their favorite activities. This reflects consistent research findings, noted above, indicating that girls are

more relationally-focused in early adolescence than boys (Barber et al., 2010; Larson & Verma, 1999), and raises the question of whether scales therefore reflect less of what is salient to girls.

**Do self-concept scales access 'contingent' rather than 'true' self-esteem?** For the active self, most self-concept scales focus on level of ability in sports and schoolwork (sometimes comparative to others), and for the social self, most focus on numbers of friends. It was therefore particularly interesting to note in this study that young people rarely cited their *level of ability* when describing their most valued activities and rarely noted the number of their relationships. Instead, they typically cited *personal improvement* in activities, and *relationship quality* in their friendships.

Potential implications of these differences are indicated by research that distinguishes between *intrinsic* and *extrinsic* self-esteem. Where self-esteem is extrinsic, or contingent on externally-motivated factors such as comparative achievement or peer approval, individuals, including those in early adolescence, may experience initial satisfaction, but suffer later declines in intrinsic motivation, capacity to learn, to relate to others, and mental health (e.g. Burwell & Shirk, 2006; Covington, 2006; Crocker, 2002, 2006).

Intrinsic motivation, in contrast, has been found to lead to enhanced performance, persistence, creativity, and general well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and to 'true', rather than 'contingent' self-esteem (Covington, 2006; Deci & Ryan, 2000). Several decades of empirical research in Self-Determination Theory (SDT; Deci & Ryan, 2000) have established that intrinsic motivation (where activities are engaged in due to inner values and interest) is associated with greater well-being, including self-esteem, compared to extrinsic motivation. As self-concept scales largely measure self-perceptions of ability in school and sports, and peer popularity, this raises the possibility that scales may access *extrinsic* self-concept factors and thus measure contingent, rather than true self-esteem. We believe this merits further exploration.

### **Final reflections and recommendations for self-concept research**

In this study, we identified a rich, complex, interrelated picture of early adolescents' valued positive active and social self factors and their meanings. We found that many activities, relationships, and their meanings, that were spontaneously most valued by substantial proportions of young people, are not reflected in widely used self-concept scales, with possible implications for self-related research.

In light of these findings and implications, what is the best course of action for researchers who wish to explore early adolescent self-concept? We suggest that researchers either use the SDQ I (Marsh, 1992), which more closely reflects the content and meaning that young people described in this study than other scales do; or use the SPPC (Harter, 1985), but incorporate further relationships with Harter's Social Support Scale for Children (1986). However, researchers should bear in mind that the content of both these scales is skewed towards school- and sport-based abilities and social competence, and that these scales may assess extrinsic, rather than intrinsic, self-esteem.

Finally, our findings suggest that most research methods over-simplify young people's active and social selves, and in particular many meanings in these self domains, that young people value. Yet research has indicated (DuBois & Tevendale, 1999) that if self-esteem supports are to be of value, they will need to explore each person's distinctive interests, rather than being based on generalized goals. This raises the possibility that self-concept methods – both qualitative and quantitative – need to be reassessed, if they are to yield rich and accurate understandings of young people's active and social selves.

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